

## writing about a play - a brief guide

Because of the way we tend to teach plays at school, it is easy to write an essay completely forgetting a key aspect of drama: that a play is **performed** as well as **heard**. Plays are always written for *the stage*, not *the page*. So, importantly, what you **see** as well as what you **hear** must form a part of your analysis and writing in your essay.

It is crucial to your success to remember that when you choose examples from the text to support the points you make in your essay to answer its question, you must explain and comment not only on the qualities and **effects** of the language used, but of the stagecraft, too, and then suggest the **reasons** or **purposes** behind the use of such effects.

- **The easiest way to do this is to write your essay as if you were a member of the play's audience.**

Notice the words highlighted in red above, and especially **effects** and **purposes**. Whatever your essay question, your teacher will expect you to analyse your play to discover its effects on the audience (and to consider different types of audience) and to explain the possible **purpose** behind such effects.

*In a drama essay, your purpose is always to explore and explain the ways by which the playwright uses the genre of drama (i.e. sound and sight) to entertain an audience and persuade them to thinking about the world in a certain way - the playwright's way! The ideas explored by a playwright are called the play's themes; and **themes** are always made clear through the play's **characters**. All essays will concern some aspect of theme and character.*

## THEMES

Drama is an entertaining form of literature and a night out at the theatre is something many people look forward to and want to enjoy. Today, not realising what an interesting experience they are missing, of course, most people watch plays not at a theatre but on TV.

Plays are a unique form of literature because they are based on a combination of language and action that is designed both to entertain by capturing the imagination and to persuade by capturing the mind. Playwrights are often very political creatures who are particularly sensitive to what they perceive to be the wrongs of society. Their plays are often a vehicle not just for entertainment but for the expression of the playwright's ideas and concerns. These are called the play's **themes**. A modern televised play can stir the imaginations and consciences of millions of people and change minds in a way little else can. Plays have always been a very radical form of literature. In Shakespeare's day, many plays were banned or had to be performed secretly or outside of the city's legal limits; some playwrights lost their lives for what they wrote.

Whatever your essay question, you cannot tackle it well unless you understand the **themes** of your play; and often, to understand the themes of a play fully, you need to have some idea of the playwright's **context** – the time, place and situation in which he or she lived and wrote: the aspects of their time and society that motivated and inspired them to write about *what they have, in the way they have*. For help with particular plays use the Internet and look up [www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com) or [www.gradesaver.com](http://www.gradesaver.com) for free study guides that will help you understand your particular play's themes and characters as well as the relevance or not of the playwright's context. Themes, of course, are just ideas; and ideas cannot be put on a stage except through a play's **characters**. So, the study of a play always involves the study of who its characters are, what they do, how they do it, who they do it to, as well as what they say, how they say it and who to... that is, the action and language of the play!

## CHARACTERS AND ACTION

A vital aspect of a play is its characters and what they do. Most essay questions concern either the **themes** of a play, or the **characters** of a play. But a question concerning a character is often just a hidden question about themes – so it is probably true to say that all questions about plays involve themes in one way or another.

Who a character is, what they say, how they say it, what other characters say about them, how other characters act around them and so forth all help to build up a character in the audience's mind.

***Do you like a particular character?***

Why? Do you empathise with him or her or even sympathise with their plight? If so – think about what it is that makes you feel this way; perhaps some aspect of the way they are being treated by their society? This is a theme of the play. Your sympathy and engagement with this character is persuading you to accepting the playwright's ideas or themes. And just because their society is, for example, Italy in the olden days, does not mean that the ideas are old hat. Society may have evolved technologically, but not always in other ways. Shakespeare's views on human relationships, and Arthur Miller's views on society are, in many ways, still very valid today.

***Do you dislike a particular character?***

Again, why? What are they doing to be disliked? How are they being presented? Are they created as a **stereotype** - a kind of "**stock character**"? What ideas occur to you when you watch them? Again, these ideas are linked to the **themes** of the play.

## **STAGECRAFT**

The **effects** and **purposes** behind the playwright's use of stagecraft are as important in your analysis and essay as the choices and uses of language. Always consider how what is said in a play fits in with the following aspects of stagecraft:

### **SETTING**

***Where and when the action occurs***

### **COSTUME**

***How a character is dressed***

### **ACTION**

***What a character does***

### **UNFOLDING ACTION or STRUCTURE**

***The division of action into scenes and acts***

- *the passing of time*
- *the introduction of a conflict*
- *the build up to a climax of action*
- *the resolution of problems*
- *the use of disguise*
- *the use of coincidence*
- *the use of dance, music and song*

### **DRAMATIC IRONY**

***Involving and engaging the audience by letting them feel they know more than the characters on stage***